

Russia: Two ministers, one deputy test positive for COVID as workers' protests grow

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On Friday, just one day after Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin was hospitalized for COVID-19, the minister for construction, housing and communal services, Vladimir Yakushev, and his deputy, Dmitry Volkov, tested positive for COVID. Yakushev was hospitalized, and his post will be filled by Nikita Stasishin.

Mishustin's hospitalization sent political shockwaves through the government, which still refuses to either publish details about his health or the politicians that he had been in contact with in recent weeks. Mishustin temporarily resigned the same day. Both he and President Vladimir Putin nominated Andrey Belousov as acting prime minister.

Only in January, Mishustin was installed as prime minister, replacing Dmitry Medvedev, in a surprise reshuffle of the Russian government. The previous government had become extremely unpopular in particular after raising of the retirement age against the opposition of 90 percent of the population. He was praised as a technocrat who, unlike Medvedev, would be able to better oversee an escalated assault on the living standards of the working class.

According to the liberal outlet *Meduza*, it is unclear whether Mishustin will return as prime minister if and when he recovers. Putin reportedly signed an executive order naming Belousov as acting prime minister even though this would not have been legally necessary as Mishustin went on sick leave. A presidential executive order *de facto* signifies the dismissal of the head of government. The order was titled, "On the prime minister's performance duties," lacking the word "temporary."

In another sign of frictions within the government, on Thursday, the head of the press department of the Russian

Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, invited the right-wing US-backed opposition leader Alexei Navalny to a public debate, an unprecedented move for a high-ranking state official. She withdrew the invitation hours before the scheduled debate on Friday took place.

Underlying the sharp political crisis of the Kremlin is the enormous escalation of class tensions internationally and in Russia amid the pandemic. According to a March poll by VTsIOM, the confidence rating for Vladimir Putin has plunged to 28.3 percent, the lowest rating recorded since 2006 when such polling started. Another poll showed that 48 percent of the population disapprove of the government's handling of the crisis, with only 46 percent supporting it.

In recent weeks, infections and deaths have skyrocketed under conditions where the government has tried to push for a reopening of the economy in several regions.

There are now 114,431 confirmed cases, placing Russia ahead of China, Brazil and Iran, and among the seven countries worldwide with the highest numbers of infections. The official figure is that 1,169 people have died of COVID-19. However, these numbers, horrific as they, are but a pale reflection of reality. Testing remains limited and faulty. There have been several reports about people with comorbidities who died after having been infected with COVID. However, the comorbidity, not COVID, was indicated as the cause of death.

As a result of decades of massive cuts to health care in the wake of the destruction of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism, hospitals have emerged as the main hotspots for infections. A state official recently acknowledged that out of 285 hotspots that the government is trying to contain, 64 percent are in hospitals. According to CNN, at least 23 wards were shut down nationwide for quarantine in April.

Many hospitals are completely dilapidated, with unhygienic conditions prevailing and often a lack of even basic things like running water. As is the case in most countries, health care workers are forced to work without basic personal protective equipment (PPE) and have a hard time getting tested. Many health care workers also report having to work even though they were sick.

One nurse at the Vreden Institute in St. Petersburg told CNN, “All my friends there are sick ... 80 percent of my colleagues. [Nurses] are sick but still have to be there and change IVs for the patients.” Three weeks ago, the Institute had gone into lockdown after about 500 patients and medical personnel had tested positive. A health care worker on YouTube issued a cry for help stating, “I’m coughing, my chest hurts but there is no one to look at it ... there is no treatment and no medicine. No one came to check on us, how we feel, what is the plan for us ... when will this end?”

Recent weeks have seen growing working class protests in opposition to the government’s handling of the crisis as internationally. Russian doctors and nurses started protesting and walking out off their jobs in late March. This week, thousands of workers at the Gazprom oil and gas condensate Chayanda field in the Yakutia region in Siberia have staged a major protest against atrocious working conditions, and the lack of testing and medical care as the virus has spread among workers. The Chayanda field feeds into the Sila Sibiri (Power of Siberia) pipeline, which delivers gas to China.

From at least Wednesday to Friday, workers also blocked a road. While the numbers in media reports have differed, thousands of the 10,500 workers employed on the field may have joined the protests. YouTube videos of the protests were watched by hundreds of thousands of people, and thousands have left comments supporting the workers. The governor of Yakutia has since acknowledged that over 1,000 workers may have been infected on the field. The official number of COVID cases in the region is just 183. So far 50 of the workers have been hospitalized.

In addition to the Chayanda field, six other major oil and gas fields operated by Gazprom and other companies have recorded COVID 19 infections. The protests at Gazprom are of particular significance as the company, Russia’s largest, accounts for about a fifth of state revenues.

The nation’s economy has been severely hit by the historic collapse of oil prices. The Russian state budget relies for about half of its revenues on oil and gas exports.

The government officially expects a decline of GDP by 5 percent and an increase in homelessness from officially 2.5 million at the moment to 8 million. However, the actual economic collapse will likely be much more severe, as the global economy is entering a recession. In a recent poll, two-thirds of companies indicated that they were planning cuts and layoffs.

Already, thousands of workers are effectively working without getting paid. A recent report by *Li fe.ru* entitled “Siberian slavery” shed light on the situation of 2,400 miners in Polysaev in the Kemerovo region in southern Siberia.

Polysaev is a mono-town, that is, a city where almost the entire social and economic infrastructure depends upon one or two companies. After a devastating decline following the dissolution of the USSR, there are still 300 such mono-towns in Russia, and they remain home to a substantial portion of the industrial working class. The Polysaev miners have not received pay in three months and are all in debt. One miner told the newspaper, “A manager with whom the workers had met tested positive for COVID-19. The entire management was sent into quarantine. Now there is basically no management at the company. Everything is unclear. They said they would fire 2,300 people if they cannot sell the mine.”

Layoffs of thousands of workers at chemical and other companies were announced in other regions as well. These layoffs will hit an already severely impoverished working class population. In the past five years, Russian real incomes have continuously declined and the number of those counting officially as “extremely poor” has risen to about 20 million, out of a population of 140 million. Meanwhile, the combined wealth of the 10 richest Russians in 2019 amounted to \$178.5 billion.



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